
◆ VMU Notes & News ◆

Volume 1 No. 1

February 2003

Welcome to the first issue of the VMU Notes and News. This publication will be quarterly and designed to keep investigators and their staff informed regarding a variety of topics concerning the care and use of laboratory animals and the programs and policies of the Portland VA Medical Center. It will be distributed electronically to all investigators with approved protocols and other interested parties. Back issues will be available on the Research and Development web page.

This year, the topics to be covered in future issues include maintaining the health status of the VMU, humane endpoints, and rodent perioperative care. The first issue will serve to review some of the key issues that affected the VMU and the Portland VAMC Institutional Animal Care and Use Committee (IACUC) this past year.

Building 6 Renovation Project

The renovation of Building 6 was scheduled to be completed by the end of October 2002. However, as is typical with large renovation projects, unexpected findings derailed the initial estimations of completion. We are in the process of moving in and testing all of the new equipment for the new facility prior to populating it.

Of course the equipment is important, but it is critical that we test the facility itself to ensure that the animals housed in the facility will be appropriately protected from feral rodents and other pests. To do this, we will house young, "clean" (immunologically naïve for common rodent pathogen) female mice in conventional housing in each room as sentinels. Conventional housing means that these mice will have the wire top (to keep them in the cage) but no filter top. This will allow any feral rodents to have nearly unobstructed access to the sentinel animals. The sentinels will be housed this way for a minimum of 4 weeks, then necropsied for evidence of disease, including parasite and viral status. Once clean sentinel animal results are obtained, we will begin to populate the new facility.

VMU Current Capacity

It is important for everyone to realize that the VMU typically runs at about 75% of its total capacity. If you have any projects that you are sitting on because you don't have space to do them or to house animals, please come and talk to me. I may not be able to find you the additional room right away, but I will try to find it as quickly as possible. Over the next few years, in addition to opening Building 6, we will be implementing new caging to help maximize our space utilization and help free up space to house additional animals or for procedure rooms.

Animal Health Status

The year 2002 also saw the successful eradication of multiple viruses and parasites from the VMU.

During the summer, we experienced an outbreak of pinworms in the summer and treated many rooms in the facility. As of the most recent quarterly sentinel testing, the VMU is officially parasite free.

Epizootic diarrhea of infant mice (EDIM), a mouse specific rotavirus, arrived in the VMU in the summer, too. Strict quarantine and adherence to standard operating procedures (SOP) and the personal protective equipment (PPE) requirements has enabled us to eradicate the virus from the VMU. As of the most recent quarantine sentinel testing, no rooms are testing positive for EDIM. That deserves a big "way to go!" for all the personnel working in the affected rooms.

The VMU has been "home" to mouse hepatitis virus (MHV), also known as mouse coronavirus, for the last 12 plus years. In February 2001, an MHV Task Force was formed to determine the best approach to eradicate the virus. As of December 2002, after a year and a half of hard work, the VMU now contains MHV-free core stock of mice that will be used to replace the MHV-positive colony currently in existence. At this time, we have one room known to be positive for MHV. Over the next 6 months, we will depopulate this room, resulting in a true MHV-free facility.

It is extremely critical to continue to follow the posted PPE policy, including the required additional precautions for quarantined rooms. Strict adherence to this policy has helped prevent the spread of viruses to the rest of the animal facility. We rely on you to make this work!

Staff Accomplishments

The VMU staff has been very busy this year, as well. All employees participate in the American Association for Laboratory Animal Science (AALAS) and its local branch, Oregon AALAS. These organizations provide educational and networking opportunities for all personnel working with animals in research. AALAS has developed standardized examinations that allow animal care technicians to reflect their level of experience and knowledge in laboratory animal science. There are three levels of certification (in increasing order of difficulty): Assistant Laboratory Animal Technician (ALAT), Laboratory Animal Technician (LAT), and Laboratory Animal Technologist (LATG). You may not be aware of it, but many of your animal care staff have been certified by AALAS for many years. These include:

- DeLynn, LATG certification
- Kami, LATG certification
- Carolyn, LAT certification
- Roland, ALAT certification

Denise joined them this year by obtaining ALAT certification. I am expecting that many of the other animal care staff will successfully pass the certification examinations in the coming year.

The Oregon Branch of AALAS requests nominations for Technician of the Year from its member institutions. This year, the VMU submitted the qualifications of three of our staff members for this honor. Larry, Kami, and Nancy were all nominated for this award because of their hard work and accomplishments in the VMU. On January 31, 2003, Larry was awarded this honor for his significant contribution to the MHV eradication project and his daily care of our opossums. His name and qualifications will be forwarded to AALAS for consideration for the AALAS Technician of the Year in 2003. We are proud of

his accomplishment and hope that he receives additional honors in the future.

And, last but not least, we are extremely proud that Roland was awarded national recognition by AALAS for his service as the Oregon AALAS Technician Branch Representative (TBR). The TBR acts as a liaison to animal care staff at all institutions within the branch and AALAS. His excellent ideas and coordination were recognized and rewarded at the National AALAS Meeting in San Antonio in October 2002. This is not an easy job, but Roland has excelled in it, earning praise from multiple institutions in Oregon.

IACUC Status

This has been a very busy year for the IACUC. The IACUC reviewed nearly 50 new protocols, many that were very complex, as well as a large number of modifications to existing protocols. This large volume of protocols and modifications meant that all of the members of the IACUC spent a great deal of time and effort reviewing protocols in order to ensure that the institution complied with the various regulatory and accrediting agencies. VA Central Office has indicated that their secondary reviews of our protocols very rarely find mistakes of any kind, a very significant achievement.

IACUC Web Page

This year, assistance regarding navigating the IACUC was made available on the PVAMC Research and Development web page (<http://www.visn20.med.va.gov/portlandrd/>). By following the "IACUC" links on this page, you can find all of the forms that are required to secure approval from the IACUC. These include the protocol form itself, amendment forms, and pilot study forms. You can also find links to the IACUC Guidelines and Policies, designed to assist you in project planning and development as well as ensure institutional compliance with relevant rules and regulations. There is a link that provides additional information regarding the "Literature Search for Alternatives," requested in item W of the protocol form. This link provides background for this requirement, suggestions of search strategies and

tips, and examples of various searches. The IACUC is currently drafting a “Frequently Asked Questions” document for investigator reference. They are hoping to provide guidance on avoiding some of the common pitfalls that send a protocol back to the investigator as “Approved Pending Modifications.” Watch your e-mail for an alert as to when this becomes available and use this link as a valuable source of information when planning your projects utilizing animals.

Reciprocity with OHSU

One policy issue that has arisen a handful of times this year involves the issue of reciprocity between the PVAMC and OHSU. *We have no formal reciprocity agreement.* The PVAMC does not accept OHSU review of an animal use protocol in lieu of review by the PVAMC IACUC. This means that if animals are housed in the VMU, animals are brought to the PVAMC lab space for procedures (including terminal procedures), and/or VA funds are used, you must have the PVAMC IACUC review and approve your protocol. The PVAMC IACUC is responsible for assuring regulatory bodies that all experiments performed within its institution (physically or financially) are complying with all required federal regulations. If the PVAMC IACUC has not reviewed the projects, we cannot make that assurance. If you are unsure about whether you need PVAMC IACUC approval, please contact the VMU office at x57610 for assistance.

Security Reminder

Please be sure that you wear your badge in the animal facilities at all times. If you see someone who is not wearing a badge, that person is to be asked to leave the facility. If they refuse, VA Security is to be called (x57164). Also, if you see someone who has a badge but you do not recognize, please engage him or her in conversation and find out if they have legitimate business in the VMU. Remember that there are many, many people working for the VA and OHSU who have badges but no business in the VMU. Again, if you are not satisfied with the response(s) to your question(s),

please contact VA Security to have the person removed from the facility. And, never allow someone you do not know to enter any of the secured areas in Research.

Animal rights extremists are expressing more willingness to cross the line from threats into vandalism, and targets are no longer limited to the animal facilities. It is very important that we all work together to ensure that everyone is protected and research is not compromised. By following the procedures outlined above, you will help to keep our physical operation secure.

However, the above steps do not protect against persons who infiltrate an institution in hopes of obtaining “the dirt” from the inside. The best way to protect against these individuals is to always conduct yourself in a manner that you would feel comfortable seeing exhibited on the evening news – treating the animals with respect. You should also be sure that *all* procedures that are being performed at the VA or with VA funds are described in a PVAMC IACUC approved protocol. Remember that if you need to alter your experimental design, it is possible to submit an amendment to the protocol for the IACUC to approve (see IACUC Web Page above). ***The protocol is your contract with the PVAMC.*** If you promise to only perform procedures approved by the IACUC, the PVAMC promises to stand behind you and support you should the animal welfare in your experiments ever be questioned.

Lastly, regarding photography and videography in the VMU. Please consult the VMU if you plan to take photographs or video of animals housed in the VMU or the facilities. For security reasons, we may need to restrict what you can photograph.

We hope that you enjoyed reading the first issue of the VMU News & Notes. If you have any comments or suggestions (including creative names!), please contact Dr. Hickman at hickmand@ohsu.edu.